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Guest Opinion

Cattle industry needs to unify to implement brucellosis plan

By Dennis McDonald
Melville, Mont.

Our second infection of brucellosis in the Montana cowherd was certainly not surprising. In fact, most in the industry and certainly Montana Cattlemen's Association, the Association of Western States Veterinarians, and the Governor's office, all alerted Montana producers that the loss of our class free status was imminent unless a comprehensive plan was put in place to deal with the brucellosis challenge. What was surprising is how a segment of our industry resisted development of any such plan. A small but vocal group fought every positive proposal put forth. They seemed intent on putting our status at risk in order to further a political agenda.

Montana Cattlemen's Association urged that the high-risk region be identified and defined. Proposals were put forth to help achieve a spatial and temporal separation of our cowherd and Yellowstone Park wildlife. When these recommendations were rejected by a portion of our industry, a second outbreak became inevitable. Given the prevalence of brucellosis in wildlife in and around Yellowstone Park, infection of our cattle was likely. Testing from elk blood samples supplied by hunters and other sources have shown that somewhere between 5% and 11% of elk north and west of the Park

are infected. This number falls to 0% as testing occurs further from the Park. In Wyoming, the percent in some areas next to the Park runs as high as 21% and the same is true for Idaho. In all three states cattle are located in close proximity to these infected elk.

In Wyoming the most recent outbreak included 26 head of cattle in a cowherd of 500 head. Wyoming, after just regaining their class free status, is on the brink of again losing that status. In fact, the owner of those cattle is considering not agreeing to the slaughter of his entire herd. If that's the case, Wyoming will lose their status within 60 days. This rancher's entire herd has been tested, the positives identified and slaughtered.

Why does APHIS require depopulation of the balance of the herd? If the herd is entirely depopulated and the rancher buys replacement cattle, those cattle will be at least as vulnerable to infection as his own cattle that tested negative. Further, causing his entire herd to be depopulated and reimbursing him presents problems not the least of which is the tax consequence. I urge our states and the federal government to pass legislation to make such depopulation and payment of compensation a non-taxable event. Otherwise, the rancher is penalized twice.

Marty Zaluski, Montana's State Veterinarian, on Friday, June 27, organized and chaired

a summit of the state vets and livestock representatives from all three states – Wyoming, Idaho, and Montana. I applaud Marty's effort and Wyoming and Idaho's participation. Marty is suggesting a series of such meetings and bringing in Fish, Wildlife and Parks representatives to develop a comprehensive plan to deal with the brucellosis challenge.

It was clear listening to all three states that all potential solutions are on the table, including split-state status. It became clear that if Montana doesn't identify and define the high-risk area and deal with that area differently than the balance of the state, other states will do that for us. In fact, Nebraska has already done so by only accepting cattle from the six counties bordering the Park if certain and more stringent testing is accomplished.

It makes absolutely no sense for producers in Ekalaka, Eureka, Hamilton or Hysam to be penalized because of a small number of cattle located in the high-risk area. Losing our brucellosis free status will cost Montana producers over \$6 million annually and that's really just a portion of the cost. No one knows how the market will discount Montana's cattle as a result of brucellosis. This \$6 million "tax" is applied to us all because Stockgrowers opposed split-state status. I hope now they will change their stance and join Montana Cattlemen

and protect our producers from this economic hardship. There are a lot of Montana miles between Yellowstone Park and Polson or Poplar.

It is also clear the federal government needs to fund research and testing to develop an effective vaccine and delivery mechanism for Park wildlife. We need all three states to be involved in developing herd plans for ranchers in the high-risk areas of all three states which will require robust testing, both calfhood and adult vaccination, and measures to prevent commingling of cattle and Park wildlife. Maybe late season or even late spring hunts might be utilized.

Finally, and maybe most important, we need our industry to come together and formulate a sound rational plan. Suining the Board of Livestock for not hazing bison across private land where access was being prevented by the landowner and attempting to haze the bison over four foot snow drifts is not only frivolous but silly. Our Board of Livestock has done an excellent job of implementing the Bison Management Plan and in trying to address a more comprehensive approach to the brucellosis challenge. Spending precious resources to defend a lawsuit filed to promote a wrong-headed political agenda is not helpful. Most cattle producers want to join Montana Cattlemen's in putting together a workable, positive plan to protect our industry.

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